



Stories of Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Exploring the experiences of professionals in innovative ECEC services

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Overview

The Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy have undergone a period of innovation and transformation from the 1990s onwards. This process has involved experimenting with new types of services in order to meet the changing needs of families. This has included creating centres for both children and parents, establishing children's spaces and delivering learning in small education groups. There has also been changing patterns in welfare policies due to constraints on public expenditure that has led to the emergence of innovative partnership between public and private actors (with a relevant presence of Social Economy actors (i.e. social cooperatives). The results of this have been a diversification in the models adopted and in how the ECEC service provision is delivered. Increasing of accessibility and quality of ECEC services provision has been possible through a pro-active engagement with local actors, including children, their families and the communities in which they are living. The innovation partnership provides further improvements in term of flexibility in opening times of centers, combining ECEC with relevant healthcare provision, and greater respect of diversity

Working with professionals from these ECEC services such as Educators, Centre Managers and Pedagogy Coordinators, we gathered a range of stories about what the service provision is like and what it offers to children and their families. In the stories, people spoke a lot about the environment, and how the outdoors and nature could be used as part of children's and families' learning experiences. They also talked about the fundamental approaches and aspects of the pedagogical practices that they use (i.e. discovery and dialogue) and the results of this (i.e. independence and connection).

The value of outdoor learning environments

Nature is seen by many of the ECEC service workers as being essential to a child's development and learning, and is incorporated into how they deliver the ECEC provision. [Anna](#) explains how the school she works at took part in an experimental project that involved them taking the children to spend a morning in the woods every two weeks, regardless of the weather. For Anna this was a success, and at the request of the older children and their parents, they are now spending more time doing activities in the wood. [Erica](#), an educator at a nursery in the city, shares these feelings. In her story she explains that the nursery has a large garden where herself, other educators and children spend a lot of time in. She thinks that is important for children who live in cities to experience nature everyday, and would like to see [the garden area used even](#) more than it currently is.

[Ilaria](#) also values the green space at the children's centre that she works at and would also like to see more activities organised in the garden. She states how she sees the children when they are inside, go to the windows to look out. Through experiencing nature, she feels the children's learning could also be improved. Commenting on how engagement with nature can support development, [Silvia](#) explains that if spaces are managed wrongly it can hinder a child's growth. Therefore, it is beneficial for children to freely engage with nature and explore more. Similarly, [Cristiana](#) states that educators and parents should not be afraid to let children experience the environment and they must instead trust them to explore. She argues that natural materials available to children to play with will feed their imagination.

Growing independence

Activities such as these contribute towards growing the children's independence. Recounting a story about an activity in which children and educators went looking for a bear in the woods, [Marika](#) – a research student – describes how the children were independent in their tasks and that they knew the importance of working together to achieve their goal. She also notes how the children and adults both seemed to enjoy this experience.

Outside of nature-based learning, [Ilaria](#) feels that it is important to allow children to argue providing that they are safe and there is no physical fighting. She says that these experiences aid the child's development as they learn for themselves how to manage negative emotions such as anger and also the consequences of acting in anger. Ilaria feels that children need opportunities to develop the skills that they need to govern such feelings and emotions. Denying children of such a learning opportunity may be more detrimental in the longer term as [Silvia's](#) story demonstrates. Silvia works with older children, aged six to eighteen years old, and she has noticed that they find it difficult to join groups and share whilst in them. She feels that it is important that children learn how to independently handle life scenarios earlier on, so that these skills can be built upon, as they grow older. [Elena's](#) story indicates how this can be achieved via an approach in which adults stay neutral on issues and let children manage arguments by themselves.

Creating dialogue

Many of the professionals who shared their stories with us, spoke about how dialogue with families is key to the innovation and developments within their services. [Chiara](#) perceives her centre as offering a growth and dialogue experience for the children, parents and educators. One of the key aims of the centre is that it provides "quality time" in which children, parents and educators can have a good time together. [Poala](#) describes how the storytelling activities at her

centre provide a space in which the educators and families can share their experiences of educating children. Similarly, [Anna](#) suggests that it is through dialogue and co-working with professionals from other sectors, that they are able to find the rights answers to the children's growth. At her centre, [Agnese](#) has observed that sometimes the way the educators behave should be adjusted to be more in-line with open dialogue techniques and in order to support a "welcoming approach". She would like to see her educators become closer to the families and see things from their perspective so that they can better evaluate their needs. In her story, [Chiara](#), who has worked in ECEC for several years, talks about how since becoming a mother herself that she has become "more empathetic towards other parents" that she works with. In essence, the experience of motherhood has changed her perceptions and the ways that she looks at things. What these stories suggest is that the combination of professional and family perspectives on children's development is central to creating on-going improvements in ECEC services that are responsive to the current needs of people, families and society.

[Click here](#) to view the extracts from these stories and [click here](#) to view the feature story.

InnoSI Themes

The stories gathered detail a number of approaches and innovations within the ECEC services in Emilia-Romagna region that are aiming to enhance the **life course perspectives** of both the children and the parents/families who they work with. The **early interventions** being made are quite diverse but a commonality between them is the focus on outdoor learning and the role of nature in children's development. Stories such as [Anna's](#), [Erica's](#) and [Marika's](#) highlight how such learning environments are empowering children to become more independent and are fostering new ways of supporting skills, knowledge and social development of children. A crucial part of supporting such development is the dialogue that the ECEC services described in these stories have or are seeking to develop with the parents and families of the children who they work with. As [Erica's](#) and [Chiara's](#) stories particularly articulate, in fostering such relationships with children's parents and families, they are able to understand their needs better and thus make their service provision much more **personalised**. In essence, there is a strong sense from the stories that parents are participating in the way in which the ECEC services are being designed.

Summary of Insights

- Enabling rather fixing:** A key message that is prevalent in [Ilaria's](#), [Silvia's](#) and [Elena's](#) stories is that the learning environments that are created in the ECEC should promote enablement. This develops many skills that the children will need throughout life.
- Combining different expertise:** Many of the stories acknowledge that professional expertise is only part of the answer to support children's development. The professionals who contributed their stories advocate dialogue with families to learn from their experiential knowledge.